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EAST INDIAN WOMEN.

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CONSIDERING that the general conditions of womanhood in India are capable of verification by the least inquiry and a very small amount of observation, it is surprising what an amount of—I will not say ignorance but what is worse—the misconception which comes from imperfect knowledge exists concerning the question even among Anglo-Indians who have passed their lives within easy reach of the facts.

I scarcely think I exaggerate when I say that nine-tenths of the English women who manifest that somewhat over-sentimental interest in their Indian sisters, which shows itself in working for *zanana** bazaars, are firmly imbued with the belief:

- (1.) That no widow in India is allowed to marry again;
- (2.) That every girl is married, not betrothed, before her teens;
- (3.) That every woman is secluded.

Now, all these three beliefs are not only false, but they make it impossible to arrive at the truth in regard to many another question.

The erroneous impression in regard to the universality of enforced widowhood does the least harm of the three, since the legislation necessary to give the individual freedom on this point is already an accomplished fact. This is all the more curious, because the only practical effect of abolishing *suttee*† (as we did by a stroke of the pen) was to substitute a soul sickening life for a soul-satisfying death. The real laying of the axe to the root of

**Zanana*, women's apartments; from the Persian *Zan*, a woman.

†*Suttee*, properly *sati*, good, pure. Used to designate the good, chaste wife who immolates herself on her husband's funeral pyre. The practice was forbidden by the English in 1829, but is not yet extinct.

the upas tree which overshadowed so many a poor soul was when, by removing the civil disabilities of widowhood, we made life bearable.

But this upas tree, at most, overshadows but half the total number of women in India. Even amongst Hindoos, enforced widowhood is not universal. Many of the agricultural tribes practise the Mosaic law of re-marriage to the dead husband's younger brother; and in India brothers include cousins. I have no wish to minimize the flagrant injustice of condemning a woman to go through life without a chance of fulfilling the functions of her womanhood. At the same time, I would point out that there is an ever-increasing number of Western girls who are in similar case. These may have consolations, more than consolations, for what is, virtually, a celibacy enforced by the custom of the society in which they dwell. They say they have, at any rate!

But the Hindoo widow also has hers, in the conviction of the indissoluble bond with the dead man, which is only comparable to, though it is absolutely distinct in its impersonality from, the sentimental exaltation of feeling which, with us, makes a woman remain unmarried for the sake of a dead lover. Some of the happiest women I have known in India, certainly some of the best, have been widows indeed.

In regard to the second belief in the universality of child marriage, the margin of error introduced by it is far greater; so great as to prevent a right solution of the problem. By believing it to be, as it were, inherent in the family life of India from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin, we inevitably make any legislation on the subject almost inconceivable. Now, my personal experience—I admit that this is a broken reed in regard to a huge continent like India, but it is all I have to offer—tells me that the actual ceremony of the *makh lawa*, *gauna* or *garbhadau*—in other words, what we should call marriage—seldom takes place, even among Hindoos in Upper India, until the age of twelve. For their own convenience, the parents will delay this till sixteen; and among some agricultural tribes, notably the *Jâts*, it is no unusual thing for a forlorn husband to have to sue for the possession of a virgin wife out of her teens, some buxom lass whose services are valuable on the ancestral farm. The tendency amongst even educated natives is to deny this experience of mine, for very

few, even amongst them, are willing to confess that child marriage has no religious sanction whatever; and they have the very greatest reluctance to admit a fact which would weaken their claim to non-interference; namely, that they themselves constantly set this custom aside for their own convenience.

Nevertheless, most will admit that the ceremony which marks the entry into actual conjugal relations only dates, as a separate function, from the sixteenth century. Before that, everything points to the betrothal—marriage taking place in such close sequence as practically to prove that it was necessary for the bride to have reached a marriageable age. Indeed, the fundamental idea which underlies the duty of the earliest possible marriage—that is, the semi-material, semi-spiritual subtlety which finds murder even in the prevention of possible life—shows that this possibility of life must be the potent factor in determining the age for marriage, and so puts this plea for infant marriage out of court.

We must, therefore, look elsewhere for the cause which has forced down the betrothal age, dissociated it from actual marriage, and made the latter possible when one or both the contracting parties are practically immature. As regards the higher classes, Mr. Ibbetson and Mr. Risley are doubtless right in attributing early betrothal to the necessity for hypergamy; but this affords us no clue to the cause which brought about what is actually a setting aside of the whole Indian theory of marriage from a religious point of view. And it is idle to say that this setting aside is due to imperfect physiological knowledge and a false estimate of natural phenomena. Here, again, my practical experience tells me that the mothers of India were quite as much alive to the futility of attempting to steal a march on nature as I was myself. It has been suggested, of course, that this forcing down of the marriageable age was made necessary by the lawless libertinism of Mohammedan conquerors; but, except that they are synchronous, I fail to find any possible connection between the two facts. Neither the presence, nor the absence, the reality nor unreality, of a prior claim affects mere lawlessness. No doubt, the bride's parents would attempt to shift their responsibility on the husband as early as possible; but it is equally sure that the latter's parents would not allow this, unless the bride was actually of an age to be a useful member of the household.

Again, if this theory of the protective power of a husband were true, we should certainly expect to find the custom of early marriage strongest amongst those who were most exposed to the risk of such libertinism. But that is exactly what we do not find. In the Punjab and down the Gangetic Valley, where the Mohammedan hordes marched and countermarched for centuries, immature marriage is the exception, not the rule; while among the peasantry, amid the infinitely great risks of outdoor laboring life, the marriageable age touches its highest limit. In Rohtak, Gurgaon, Karnal, all districts in the immediate vicinity of Delhi, the centre round which Mohammedan conquest raged, the Jâts and other cognate races stand pre-eminent both for the freedom of their women and the mature age to which marriage is deferred.

Finally, it is inconceivable that the Hindoos should resort to the uncertain shield of a husband, when the new fashion of seclusion, which is also synchronous with conquest, gave them a far more efficient one. Indeed, I fail to see why they should have adopted seclusion from their conquerors, as they did with astonishing speed, had it not been for the immunity from all but organized outrage on their women which it afforded.

Therefore, though it is undoubtedly true that the colonization of India by Mohammedan races had the effect of dissociating betrothal from marriage, and so by degrees lowering the age for both, I see no reason for putting this down directly to libertinism. That most likely led to a whole-hearted adoption of seclusion; but it is the seclusion itself which led to child marriage, as I hope to show further on.

And this brings us to our third erroneous belief, namely, that every woman in India is secluded. This is the most harmful of all, for it is responsible for a great deal of quite unnecessary respect for the laws governing a custom which is considered to be universal. Even Lady Dufferin, than whom no one has a better right to speak on the subject, seems to me to help toward maintaining this false impression when she wrote in an article in the *Nineteenth Century* entitled "Woman in India," that "*under the present conditions of Eastern life, seclusion offers many undoubted advantages,*" and that "*neither the men nor the women of the country are prepared for its abolition.*"

I remember how, when I was reading these sentences, my mind's eye reverted to an incident of my camp life in India—to

a wide plain of golden grain, circled by a rim of golden sky; to a group of women, stalwart and strong, with a gleam of looking-glass embroidery in their full blue petticoats, a sheen of yellow silk upon the madder-red veils cast back from their honest faces, their full brown throats, and their capable arms, whose hands still grasped the sickle (despite the brown babies set astride their hips!). A group which waylaid me to ask why the *Hugoos* (my husband, the district magistrate) had not sent for *them* to inquire of the crops and the oxen, since they knew quite as much about the welfare and work of the village as the men!

Is it not to cast an unmerited slur on the lives of women like these (and there are millions of women as free to come and go, to labor beside their men-folk, to speak to strangers, as these *Jâtins* were), to say they are not fit for such freedom? As a matter of fact, fully one-half of the women of India have such freedom without suffering the least moral deterioration thereby. My experience is that the gad-about women lead more moral lives than the secluded ones. That this is, in a measure, due to the more healthy and natural tone of country, as distinct from town, life—for strict seclusion is a thing of cities—is no doubt true; but, as their own saying, “the gad-about’s virtue has no screen between it and the truth,” points out, the mere fact of publicity necessitates circumspection. And though the record of criminality in our police courts is against the unsecluded women, this has to be largely discounted by the fact that the veil hides from the public ken vice as well as virtue!

If, then, Indian society in the upper or secluded classes is not fit for the freedom already enjoyed by their sisters in the lower ones, so much the worse for the upper classes! Personally, however, I cannot consent to throw such wholesale doubt on the moral strength of secluded women, though no one who has lived in a *Zanana*, even for twenty-four consecutive hours, can fail to feel how utterly demoralizing the atmosphere is, and must be.

Given, however, this sweeping assertion of unfitness for freedom, it is not surprising to find its corollary in the line of policy laid down by the admirable fund which bears Lady Dufferin’s name; that it should “respect to the very uttermost all the laws which govern the *purdah*.”*

**Purdah*, literally a screen used to denote seclusion. Thus it is said of a woman: “She is *purdah-nishin*,” literally, sitting in a screen.

Now, apart from the unmerited slur which I have mentioned, the implied assumption here is that such respect is necessary to the welfare of the work; and this gives an absolutely false impression to the general public. As a matter of fact, if not one single secluded woman were treated, the task of the charity would still be far beyond its present strength. We should not, of course, be giving medical aid to secluded women, but we should be giving it to women who need it to the full as much. There are some, myself among the number, who hold that this would be better, since we should run less risk of unnecessary temporizing with a system which is in itself responsible for half the physical ailments we have to treat in the *zananas*; who think that, by so treating them, we not only spend time and money in perpetuating a vicious circle of error, but also lose the strongest fulcrum we have against the dead weight of a vicious custom—the strongest because it is always the one nature uses—the fulcrum of pain.

But that is another story. And I will pass on to a further false impression which is given by the words quoted above, namely that the system of seclusion has been, as it were, acquitted by experts of any active responsibility for the crying evils of Indian social life; since, otherwise, toleration could scarcely be the keynote of our desire to do good.

But this is not the case. No one, as I have said before, who has lived even for four and twenty consecutive hours in the ordinary atmosphere of an ordinary *zanana*, can fail to see its inevitable effect upon the children who are brought up in it. Briefly, this drawing of a veil between womanhood and the lustful eyes of the world makes it impossible for the children to be blind. Nor is this surprising. It does not need a doctor to tell us how the exclusion of all interests save one, the concentration of the whole mind on but one function, is invariably followed by a marked development in that interest, that function.

And in the *zanana* the underlying assumption that the claims of sex are paramount, finds expression in almost every detail of life. It is the *stri achchar*, or “woman’s tradition,” which is practically responsible for child marriage, as it is undoubtedly for the thousand and one unmentionable rites and ceremonies which, aped as they naturally are by the unsecluded classes—since gentility is always aped—make the whole subject seem so revolting to English women.

Yet there is no reason why this should be so; for no higher ideal of marriage exists than that inculcated by the Hindoo religion; though not, alas! by the average Hindoo woman.

This is not merely the expression of my own opinion. Bahoo Mohin Chander Sen writes that it is "the mother, the mother-in-law and the female relations generally, who combine to force the child into premature marriage;" and most native gentlemen will admit that this is the case and that they are helpless before the *stri achchar*, though they will admit it with reluctance. But if further proof of the fact that women are all powerful on this point is needed, it may be found in the absolute impotence of even educated natives to break through its fetters at the time of the agitation concerning the Age of Consent Bill. It was purely pitiable. It was then that I began to suspect that seclusion was responsible for immature marriage and the ever-increasing ritual—born of woman's idle and morbid imaginings—which has grown up around it. Of this ritual the men speak with assumed contempt but with real awe; for they know that, so long as a woman's life finds its sole interest in itself, the *stri achchar* will remain strong enough even to upset an Act of Parliament—as, virtually, it has, since the Age of Consent Bill is absolutely a dead letter. Personally, I never came across a woman who was even aware of its existence, and my insistence on it has only provoked a contemptuous amusement.

But the *stri achchar* does more than this. It defies nature. It disperses the mist with which she wisely shrouds the great problem of sex until the solver's foot hovers on the edge of it.

And it is this fact which makes child marriage possible. For it is possible to an Indian child who has been taught to play in deadly earnest at marrying her doll, to lisp curses on anyone who shall supplant her in her husband's desire, and to look forward to her womanhood as to a festival of pleasure. This is my quarrel with seclusion. It prevents nature from rearing her children in the happy normal state of ignorance in which she rears all young things up to a certain point; it makes it impossible for her to take her own way, unchecked, yet unforced. And this is the reason why the general impression that seclusion is universal, that it is impossible to work for the women of India if we refuse it respect to the uttermost, that for the sake of either physical or mental comfort it is necessary to tolerate it, seems to me productive of so

much harm. Personally, I deprecate any exotic sympathy with the sorrows and sufferings of seclusion which will tend to prolong its life, because I believe it to be entirely responsible for nearly all the social difficulties of India. Of course, now-a-days, physical pain is held to be the only unmitigated wrong; but, even from this point of view, it is possible that a lesser pain, long drawn out, holds as much pure martyrdom to the individual as a shorter, more severe one.

Of course, it is quite impracticable to tilt at seclusion as if it were a windmill; on the other hand, I do think that many of the Western women who are doing so much in India yield to its claims far too easily. Take, for instance, the case of girls' schools. I have had, in a professional capacity, to examine them by hundreds, and nothing has amused me more than the ever-varying claims for conveyance and chaperonage to and from the school, on the ground of pupils being secluded; claims which, in every case, mean the spending of public money. In my own schools, I let it be known that I would pay for neither, and I never suffered from any lack of pupils; but, of course, the mere fact that I insisted on religious instruction in its own faith being given in each school, whether Hindoo, Sikh, or Mohammedan, made such a stand possible.

Naturally, also, the old problem as to which came first, the owl or the egg, makes it difficult to decide whether we are not justified in tolerating the results in order to attack the cause. Lady Dufferin says that "most English ladies who interest themselves in ameliorating the condition of their Indian sisters. . . . have ultimate designs on the *pardah*;" and she is right. But I am not sure how far what I may call a constructive denial of their aim is permissible. No good fight was ever fought under a false flag.

One thing seems to me certain, the impossibility of effecting any radical change, such as was attempted in the Age of Consent Bill, until we get rid of the women's apartments. Mr. Mohun Ghose believes the Government strong enough to legislate on the marriageable age of all Her Majesty's subjects. So it is ; but the *stri achchar* is strong enough to defy legislation.

At the same time, I think it is possible to make our own position in regard to the results of this woman's tradition as to marriage more free of blame than it is, by the simple expedient

of treating a betrothal contract in our courts exactly as we treat any other contract. I can conceive of no reason why it should not be included in the list of all other contracts between minors, as not cognizable under the code, so that no dispute arising out of it could be referred to our courts. The objection that this would not affect existing custom appreciably, if it were the only disability—if the betrothal or marriage were to be considered ratified on the attainment of legal age without such dispute—appears to me a point in its favor. It means nothing drastic.

Nevertheless, since the credit and consequent value of a contract depends entirely on the certainty of its fulfilment, the impossibility of enforcing such fulfilment would, if it did nothing else, certainly tend to shorten the period during which evasion was possible. And this must tend to bring the date of betrothal closer to the age at which it can be legally ratified. Which is exactly what we want. In addition, we should throw the *onus* of coercion on the religious and social beliefs which are supposed to enjoin the existing custom; which, again, is also desirable. This policy, too, has its sanction. "Ye have a law, see ye to it."

F. A. STEEL.